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ABSTRACT

Portfolios, collections of student work representing a selection of performance, are being used in classrooms today in the tradition of the visual and performing arts in which they serve to showcase a student's best pieces and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces. Portfolios are useful as a support to new instructional approaches that emphasize the student's role in constructing understanding and the teacher's role in promoting understanding. Although there is no single way to develop portfolio programs, in all such programs students are expected to collect, select, and reflect on their work. Research supports the finding that student awareness of work and of evaluation strategies is enhanced through portfolios. The use of portfolios is not without drawbacks, primarily in the time and effort required, but these are generally seen to be worthwhile burdens. A brief summary of research into portfolios highlights some current projects that investigate their use. Sources of information about portfolios are listed. (SLD)

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Education

Consumer Guide

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Student Portfolios: Classroom Uses

What is it? Portfolios are collections of student work representing a selection of performance. Portfolios in classrooms today are derived from the visual and performing arts tradition in which they serve to showcase artists' accomplishments and personally favored works. A portfolio may be a folder containing a student's best pieces and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces. It may also contain one or more works-in-progress that illustrate the creation of a product, such as an essay, evolving through various stages of conception, drafting, and revision.

More teachers have recently begun using portfolios in all curricular areas. Portfolios are useful as a support to the new instructional approaches that emphasize the student's role in constructing understanding and the teacher's role in promoting understanding. For example, in writing instruction, portfolios can function to illustrate the range of assignments, goals, and audiences for which a student produced written material. In addition, portfolios can be a record of the activities undertaken over time in the development of written products. They can also be used to support cooperative teaming by offering an opportunity for students to share and comment on each other's work. For example, a videotape of students speaking French in the classroom can be used to evoke a critical evaluation of each other's conversational skills at various points during the school year.

Recent changes in education policy, which emphasize greater teacher involvement in designing curriculum and assessing students, have also been an impetus to increased portfolio use. Portfolios are valued as an assessment tool because, as representations of classroom-based performance, they can be fully integrated into the curriculum. And unlike separate tests, they supplement rather than take time away from instruction. Moreover, many teachers, educators, and researchers believe that portfolio assessments are more effective than "old-style" tests for measuring academic skills and informing instructional decisions.

Why try it? Students have been stuffing assignments in notebooks and folders for years, so what's so new and exciting about portfolios? Portfolios capitalize on students' natural tendency to save work and become an effective way to get them to take a second look and think about how they could improve future work. As any teacher or student can confirm, this method is a clear departure from the old write, hand in, and forget mentality, where first drafts were considered final products.

How does it work? Although there is no single correct way to develop portfolio programs, in all of them students are expected to collect, select, and reflect. Early in the school year, students are pressed to consider: What would I like to reread or share with my parents or a friend? What makes a particular piece of writing, an approach to a mathematics problem, or a write-up of a science project a good product? In building a portfolio of selected pieces and explaining the basis for their choices, students generate criteria for good work, with teacher and peer input. Students need

specifics with clear guidelines and examples to get started on their work, so these discussions need to be well guided and structured. The earlier the discussions begin, the better.

While portfolios were developed on the model of the visual and performing arts tradition of showcasing accomplishments, portfolios in classrooms today are a highly flexible instructional and assessment tool, adaptable to diverse curricula, student age/grade levels, and administrative contexts. For example:

The *content* in portfolios is built from class assignments and as such corresponds to the local classroom curriculum. Often, portfolio programs are initiated by teachers, who know their classroom curriculum best. They may develop portfolios focused on a single curricular area—such as writing, mathematics, literature, or science—or they may develop portfolio programs that span two or more subjects, such as writing and reading, writing across the curriculum, or mathematics and science. Still others span several course areas for particular groups of students, such as those in vocational-technical, English as a second language, or special arts programs.

The *age/grade level of students* may determine how portfolios are developed and used. For example, in developing criteria for judging good writing, older students are more likely to be able to help determine the criteria by which work is selected, perhaps through brainstorming sessions with the teacher and other students. Younger students may need more directed help to decide on what work to include. Older students are generally better at keeping logs to report their progress on readings and other recurrent projects. Also, older students often expand their portfolios beyond written material to include photographs or videos of peer review sessions, science experiments, performances, or exhibits.

Administrative contexts also influence the structure and use of portfolios. While the primary purpose of portfolios for most teachers is to engage students, support good curricula and instruction, and improve student teaming, some portfolio programs are designed to serve other purposes as well. For example, portfolios can be used to involve parents in their children's education programs and to report individual student progress. Teachers and administrators need to educate parents about how portfolios work and what advantages they offer over traditional tests. Parents are generally more receptive if the traditional tests to which they are accustomed are not being eliminated. Once portfolios are explained and observed in practice, parents are often enthusiastic supporters.

Portfolios may also be used to compare achievement across classrooms or schools. When they are used for this purpose, fairness requires that standards be developed to specify the types of work that can be included and the criteria used to evaluate the work. Guidelines may also address issues of teacher or peer involvement in revising draft work or in deciding on what to identify as a best piece.

In all administrative contexts, teachers need administrative support to initiate a portfolio program. They need support material such as folders, file drawers, and access to a photocopy machine, and time to plan, share ideas, and develop strategies.

All portfolios—across these diverse curricular settings, student populations, and administrative contexts—involve students in their own education so that they take charge of their personal collection of work, reflect on what makes some work better, and use this information to make improvements in future work.

What does the research say? Research shows that students at all levels see assessment as something that is done to them on their classwork by someone else. Beyond "percent correct," assigned letter grades, and grammatical or arithmetic errors, many students have little knowledge of what is involved in evaluating their classwork. Portfolios can provide structure for involving students in developing and understanding criteria for good efforts, in coming to see the criteria as their own, and in applying the criteria to their own and other students' work.

Research also shows that students benefit from an awareness of the processes and strategies involved in writing, solving a problem, researching a topic, analyzing information, or describing their own observations. Without instruction focused on the processes and strategies that underlie effective performance of these types of work, most students will not learn them or will learn them only minimally. And without curriculum-specific experience in

using these processes and strategies, even fewer students will carry them forward into new and appropriate contexts. Portfolios can serve as a vehicle for enhancing student awareness of these strategies for thinking about and producing work—both inside and beyond the classroom.

What are the drawbacks? Good portfolio projects do not happen without considerable effort on the part of teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Research shows that portfolios place additional demands on teachers and students as well as on school resources. Teachers need not only a thorough understanding of their subject area and instructional skills, but also additional time for planning, conferring with other teachers, developing strategies and materials, meeting with individual students and small groups, and reviewing and commenting on student work. In addition, teachers may need extra space in their classrooms to store students' portfolios or expensive equipment such as video cameras.

However, portfolios have been characterized by some teachers as a worthwhile burden with tangible results in instruction and student motivation. (For more information on the role of administrators and policymakers in the success of portfolio programs, refer to the next issue of *CONSUMER GUIDE*, "Student Portfolios: Administrative Uses," to be published in December 1993.)

Who is working in this area?

- Winfield Cooper is editor of the quarterly *Portfolio News,* a publication of the Portfolio Assessment Clearinghouse. *Portfolio News* provides 20 to 30 pages of articles, project briefs, and other materials by teachers, project directors, and researchers about local and state portfolio projects. It also serves as an information exchange for people interested in portfolios.
- PROPEL is a continuation of ARTS PROPEL, a cooperative research project involving the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Harvard Project Zero, and Educational Testing Service (ETS). Throughout both stages of the project, portfolios have been used along with classroom observations and external assessments to assess teaming in three content areas—imaginative writing, music, and the visual arts. Information on the PROPEL/ARTS PROPEL approach is now available from ETS in four handbooks—a general overview handbook and one for each of the three content areas. The handbooks describe program and teacher strategies and illustrate student production, perception, and reflection in projects that extend over time.
- Maryl Gearhart of CRESST is investigating two collaborative research projects involving portfolios in elementary schools. One project involves analyzing issues and problems encountered when teachers use a scoring rubric, originally developed for writing assessments, to score writing collections in student portfolios. Gearhart and her coresearchers called for strategies that "balance the tension between evaluators' needs to constrain and structure portfolios for assessment and teachers' needs to devise portfolio uses that ensure their discretion in curriculum." In the second project, Gearhart is documenting the impact of mathematics portfolios on instructional methods and students' learning and motivation.
- Richard P. Mills is commissioner of education in Vermont, where fourth and eighth grade students are being assessed in writing and mathematics using three methods: a portfolio, a best piece from the portfolio, and a set of equivalent performance tasks. Even as the results from the first year of implementation are being analyzed, the program is being expanded.
- Lauren Resnick and Marc Tucker are codirectors of the New Standards Project, which has embarked on a process to develop a new assessment system to support world class standards of performance for all students. The system employs advanced forms of performance assessment, such as portfolios, exhibitions, projects, and timed performance examinations. Among its partners are the following states: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, New York, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.

Where can I get more information?

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Portfolio News
Portfolio Assessment Clearinghouse
San Dieguito Union High School District
710 Encinitas Boulevard
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PROPEL/ARTS PROPEL
Pittsburgh Public Schools
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ARTS PROPEL
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